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KATHAKIRTAN
A STUDY IN EVOLUTION AND THEME

R. SATHYANARAYANA

1. EVOLUTION

Katha Kirtan has come a long way in the cultural history of India. It continues to be a most effective, a most inexpensive instrument of group communication. Basically, it is story telling. A universal and natural love for story telling and story listening developed not only into a folk medium involving music, dancing and drama in which a single person enacts several dramatis personae, but also into a recitative in Campū Kāvya and ballads as well as into annotated recitation of *purāṇa* stories. It has now evolved into a versatile, composite art. As with most other cultural modes of the Hindus, its theme, content and context have been sublimated into a spiritual expression. It is ubiquitous in this vast subcontinent in one form or another.

South India is characterised by a pronounced cultural agglutination in its states. So Katha Kirtan appears in more or less morphic similarity in Karnataka, Andhra, Tamilnadu and Kerala through interdiffusion. This is revealed in its theme, method and apparatus.

In its present form, it is about 150 years old. It has developed in three phases. Its prototype appeared in various parts of India in the 16th century. In Maharashtra the *bhakti* movement led by Tukaram and Namdev gave birth to a type of recitative narrative in Marathi which sought to instil in the masses a love of God and a leaning to ethical, spiritual life. This was parallelled in North India with the work of saints such as Tulasidas and Kabir, in Bengal by Caitanya-deva, in Mithila by Ṭhākur Narottam, in Tamilnadu by the *śaiva* saints, in Andhra by the Tāḷḷapākam triad and Bhadrācala Rāmadās and in Karnataka by the *haridāsās* and *śivasaraṇas*. The *povāḍa*, a story narrative in song gained popularity in Maharashtra and helped to mobilise peoples'

patriotism and their resistance to alien domination. *Lāvaṇi* is also another popular story-recitative, which originated in Maharashtra but diffused into South India. In its prototypic phase the Katha Kirtan was mainly a musical discourse, with little or no prose, but made up of one or more varieties of song and verses selected from diverse sources so as to fit into the general scheme of the story.

Katha Kirtan emerged into the second phase in Tanjore at the royal court or Serfoji II (1798-1832) and subsequently in Travancore at the royal court of Svāti Tirunāḷ Rāmavarma (1813-1846). When the Marāthā rulers took over Tanjore from the Nāyaks, they patronised, besides local arts and artists, many artists and art forms of Maharashtra also. One such artist from Maharashtra was Anantapadmanābha Gosvāmi, also popularly known as Meru-gosvāmi or Meru-svāmi. He was equally gifted in both Hindustani and Karnataka music and was aptly renowned as Kokilakaṇṭha. He was a *sādhu* and a great *kīrtanakāra*. He was invited by Serfoji II to his court where he transplanted the Katha Kirtan of Maharashtra of his times. This was then in the form of a series of songs drawn from various saints and excerpts from sacred lore, so chosen as to converge into a religious, spiritual or ethical theme. The songs used were indigenous to Maharashtra, viz, *lāvaṇi*, *ovī*, *abhaṅg*, *savāi*, *sāki*, *añjani*, *ekaḍa*, *diṇḍi*, *khaḍga*, *doharā*, *nāmāvali*, and *bhajan*. The presentation contained little or no prose, composed or improvised. The influence of these songs is still strong in Katha Kirtan of Tamilnadu and Karnataka even today. Merusvāmi enriched this form by local adaptation. Thus it assimilated much regional musical and literary material such as *āryā*, *śloka*, *viruttam*, and song patterns like *padya*, *taraṅga*, *cūrṇikā*, *daṇḍaka*, *aṣṭaka*, *aṣṭapadi*, *devaranāma*, *tēvāram* and *tiruppu* from Telugu, Kannaḍa and Tamiḷ. It still lacked dramatisation and contained only brief prose passages. This form gained instant and universal popularity in Tamilnadu.

Merusvāmi's fame soon spread to Kerala. He responded to the invitation of Svāti Tirunāḷ repeatedly and finally after Serfoji's death, settled in the royal court of Travancore, and became Tirunāḷ's *kulaguru*. Tirunāḷ was himself a gifted, versatile music composer and avidly took to this novel art of Katha Kirtan. He endeavoured to standardise variations in individual presentations and content by authoring two models, viz., the *Ajāmiḷa* and the *Kucela-upākhyānas*. These were largely based

on Marāṭhi song types such as *sāki*, *diṇḍi*, *ovī*, *abhang* and *ślokas*. He innovated even Hindusthani musical forms like the *dhrupad* into the Katha Kirtan. Merusvāmi himself performed *Kucelopākhyāna* in the presence of his disciple, the royal composer in February, 1838.

However, Andhra was developing at this time a parallel growth in Katha Kirtan, called *harikathā* in which the influence of the Maharashtrian analogues was, if any, only peripheral. The indigenous art form *Kucipuḍi* is believed to have inspired the Katha Kirtan into existence. After all, if the various roles in a *kalāpa* or an *yakṣagāna prasanga* are performed by a single person in a musical discourse, it is the equivalent of Katha Kirtan. In fact, Siddhendra-yogi (17th cent.) to whom is credited the founding of *Kucipuḍi* dance drama, says in the *Kavipraśaṁsā* verse (self-laudation) of Bhāmākalāpa:

जनुलार विनुडि हरिकथविनवेड्डक गलिगिनेनि

Historians of Telugu *harikathā* regard it as an offshoot of *yakṣagāna*. *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* of Munipalle Subrahmanya Kavi (c. 1780 A. D.) is considered the forerunner of *harikathā*. However, its emergence in a clearly crystallised form may be traced to the *Mokṣaguṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* of Tāḷḷuri Nārāyaṇa Kavi (early 19th cent.) which employs musicometrical forms like *pañca-cāmara*, *ragaḍa*, *mañjari* and *tōhāra* which are indigenous to the Andhra soil. *Tōhāra* is a narration-recitative and compares structurally with *povāḍa* and *lāvaṇi* but functionally with *nirūpaṇam* of Tamil Katha Kirtan. Dramatisation and dialogue are both prosodial in character and scant in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* but well developed in the *Mokṣaguṇḍam Rāmāyaṇa* and its successors composed by Singari-dāsa, Narasimha-dāsa, Sangaḍī Nāga-dāsa, Tirukkaḍaiyūr Kṛṣṇa-dāsa, etc. But the *harikathā* acquired a new dimension and its modern form due to the prolific and brilliant *harikathā* compositions of Ādibhaṭla Nārāyaṇa-dāsa (born in 1864 as Sūryanārāyaṇa) who is hailed as the father of modern Katha Kirtan in Andhra. The contemporary art is enriched with the *prasangas* of a host of worthy composer-performers such as Bāgepalli Anantarāmācārya, Anakāpalli Bālāji-dāsa, Tirunagari Śeṣa-dāsa, Vīrabhadra Rao, Kosūri Bhogalinga-dāsa, Kommūri Bālabrahmānanda, Parimi Subrahmanya-dāsa, Mulukuṭla Ponnayya Śāstri, Peddinṭi Dīkṣita, Tiruvenkaṭācārya and others.

Tanjore witnessed the final phase of Katha Kirtan development in Tamilnadu in the third quarter of the 19th century. This was again

inspired by Maharashtrian influence in the persons of the great *kīrtan-kāras*, Morker-bāva and Rāmacandra-bāva who migrated to Tanjore from Gwalior (c.1860). The father figure of modern Tamil Katha Kirtan is Tanjore Kṛṣṇa Bhāgavata who expanded the horizons of the art under their influence. He innovated by the introduction of Tyāgarāja *kṛtis* to fit into the context and composed many crisp, attractive *nirūpaṇams* (narrative-recitative vehicles). These relieved the monotony which Katha Kirtan had suffered in its folk versions such as *villuppāṭṭu*, *kaicilambu pāṭṭu* and *lāvaṇi pāṭṭu*. Introduction of the *nirūpaṇam* marked an important stage in the evolution of Katha Kirtan. They were composed also by other stalwart music composers and Katha Kirtan composers like Muvvalur Sabhāpati Iyer, Meḷattur Veṅkatarāma Śāstri and Śarabha Śāstri. At this time Katha Kirtan, also called Kālakṣepam, acquired the paraphernalia of singing, dramatisation, dialogues, some dancing, accompaniment of second voices, harmonium, violin, hand cymbals and chipla. The art achieved respect, high professional status and popularity because musician colossuses like Mahāvaidyanātha Iyer, Sūlamaṅgalam Vaidyanātha Bhāgavata, Harikeśanallūr Muttaiah Bhāgavata, Gopālakṛṣṇa Bhārati, Varahur Gopāla Bhāgavata, Aṇṇāsvāmi Bhāgavata, Śrīraṅgam Śaṭhakopācārya, Sarasvatī Bai and others strode the field.

Evolution in Karnataka

The evolution of Katha Kirtan has received a separate treatment in this paper because much of what follows is being presented or organised in this context for the first time.

Musical variation of stories for edification or amusement is an ancient practice. Katha Kirtan for the former related to the doings or greatness of Hari, Hara and Jina, and was of the form of epic poetry in Kannaḍa composed by poets of the respective cults. Old manuscripts of such epic poems in which *rāgas* are prescribed for different chapters are preserved even today. Such poetry recitation is called *'odu'* in Kannaḍa, *'vacana'* in Samskṛta and *'gamaka'* in technical parlance. Poetry recitation was often accompanied by prose commentary. *Campū* works were, of course, admixture of prosodial structures and prose passages. A group of thirtytwo rāgas, collectively called *battīsa-rāga*, had acquired an association of religious, ritual or spiritual sanctity

and was employed in *gamaka*. *Purāṇa* recitation with translation and commentary in Kannaḍa is also a time-honoured custom. Story telling entertainment was called *Kathāvinoda, Kathana, Kathāprapañca, goṣṭhī*, etc.

Clear evidence is available to assert that *Kīrtana* in Kannada, was performed in a different format also since early times. Abundant musico-literary forms in Kannaḍa, rich in variety and theme and suited to musical narratives, were known for more than a thousand years. Treatises on Kannaḍa metrical structures describe descriptive songs in verse called *bedaṇḍe, cattāṇa, melvāḍu* and *bājanegabba*. Musical treatises describe *kanda, vṛtta, gāthā, toṭaka, jethaka, varṇa, kaivāḍa etā, śukasārita, dvipadī, tripadī, caupadī, ṣaṭpadī*, etc. which were prescribed to be composed in Kannaḍa. Nānyadeva alone describes besides these, as many as twenty-two Kannaḍa compositional forms which were popularly sung in his days. These are *madhumādhava, varṇa, raṇaraṅga, tripuṣkara, tripurāntaka, tryambaka, tripiṣṭaka, trikūṭa, caturbhuja, caturyuga, caturaśra, caturdaśa, catuścaraṇa, pañcānana, pañcabāna, bhāvatrivikrama, manimālaka, kṛśodara, vijaya, sāgara, pitāmaha* and *jambheṭika*. Into this main stream of classical forms of secular music flowed tributaries of folk, quasifolk, or religious song forms also. Śivasaraṇas of Karnataka contributed *kāla, jñana, mantragopya,* and *vacana,* while the Haridāsas gave *ugābhoga, daṇḍaka, suvvāli, vṛttanāma, tattva, sulādi, svapnagadya, udayarāga,* etc. Prose, in an elastic prosodial construction, was available in the form of *gadya* and its variety, *cūrṇikā*.

Katha Kirtan was performed to assemblies in temples under the name of *kathāgoṣṭhi* or *kathāprapañca*. These had religious and spiritual themes. Secular performances, called *saṁkathāvinoda, kathana,* etc. were held at the courts of kings and aristocrats or in public places. The former aimed at spiritual or ethical elevation while the latter was for entertainment, though always covertly didactic. I shall cite here one primary evidence for each from the 12th century Karnataka.

An inscription dated 1186 A. D. and found on an erect slab in Kāḷamma temple in the village of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga in Saundatti tāluk (Belgaum district) records the installation of two *liṅgas* by Habbenāyaka and one by his wife Balliyakka, consecration of shrines for these and grants therefor. The *liṅga* was given the name Habbeśvara. This philanthropy and religious fervour were the direct outcome of listening to a Katha Kirtan called *kathā prapañca* in the inscription. The

incription was made during the reign of Tribhuvanamalla Vira Someśvara IV of Western Calukyas, eulogises the village and the donor, records the date and, after a Samskṛta stanza eulogising philanthropy and valour states:-

एल्ला संपत्तुगळ्गे पुण्यमे मोदला पुण्यक्केल्लवीश्वरप्रातिष्ठेये मोत्तमोदलेन्तेनला पुण्यव बळिविडिदेल्ला पुण्यङ्गळुं दोरेकोळ्गुं मत्तवेल्ला प्रतिमेगळं प्रतिष्ठेमाडिदोडवा देवर्कळ पेसरेयक्कुवीश्वरप्रतिष्ठेयं माडिदवनीश्वरनेयक्कुवेंबुदना देवर पेसरक्कुवेन्दरिदुकोळ्वुदु

Virtue is the best of all wealth; installation of a god-symbol is the best virtue. For, all virtues stem from this. Whosoever names the god-symbol after himself verily becomes that god.

Such was the theme and motivation of Katha Kirtan in Karnataka; they continued to be so for philanthropy till recently.

The second is a literary source: *Rājamānasollāsa* of Bhūlokamalla Sarvajña Someśvara III (22nd March 1129). This encyclopedic work describes *kathāvinoda,* details of which are interesting against the background of the foregoing, for both sources have territorial, temporal and cultural continuity. Sarvajña Someśvara — aptly so named— prescribes the following qualifications for a *kathaka.* He must be an orator, skilful, competent, attentive, neutral with respect to likes and dislikes, mature, youthful, yet old in wisdom, handsome and well developed in physique; he must be aware of his times and country, a fire to the fuel of vairāgya, an axe to the tree of sorrow, a moon to the ocean of śṛṅgāra, a sun to the lotus of love; he must have strong faith in acts of duty and charity; he should know the ways of the world, the sixtyfour arts and tales of many moods. He must know the right time (to tell a tale: to commence and to reach the climax, etc.). He should know human nature intimately. Only auspicious stories with happy ending should be performed with exaggerated literary style, from sources like the *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Bṛhatkathā, Purāṇas,* plays, epic poetry and sagas.

Someśvara III describes four varieties of a *kathā* performance: (1) *ekavaktra* (solo), (2) *dvivaktra* (duet) (3) four-artist performance (*caturbhigiyate*) and (4) multiple artist-performance (*bahupūruṣā*). The qualifications of the performer are prescribed thus: he should be an expert in

grammar, worldly affairs, oratory, economy of expression; he should know Vedic lore, literature, several scripts and singing. He should be able to recite the verses effectively in appropriate *rāgas* and correct word decomposition. He should possess a sweet voice and correct intonation. He should be a cognoscente in the art, expert in *purāṇas*. He should avoid noisy sucking of saliva during performance. The duet was performed to a purāṇic theme. The third variety was presented with the text set to *rāga* and *tāla* in vernacular languages and in *rāgaḍa* and *daṇḍaka* prabandhas. Here the chief performer was assisted by three female second voices.

The fourth variety, *bahupūruṣā,* was a Katha Kirtan exclusive to Kannaḍa. It consisted of *ṣaṭpadī* recitation accompanied by *kinnari,* and a generous sweet voice of the main performer himself. He should be handsome and well proportioned in body. Many female voices accompanied him, two mridangas but no cymbals. The Katha Kirtan here consisted chiefly of descriptive songs.

It is thus evident that the theme was centred on spiritual values, which constituted the *sthāyi bhāva.* Around this nucleus was woven a mosaic of auxiliary moods and feelings. A continuous interest and effective participation was ensured in the story. The presentation included as and when occasion demanded, moods of humour, wonder, marvel, etc. but it gained credibility and acceptance because it firmly rested on referability, a quality which Bharatamuni has called.

लोकस्य सर्वकर्मानुदर्शकम्
त्रैलोक्यस्यास्य सर्वस्य भावानुकीर्तनम् ।

Katha Kirtan has flowed in Karnataka, from atleast the 12th century A.D. in three streams: *śiva bhakti, viṣṇu bhakti* and *jina bhakti.* It took the form of narrative recitation in which dancing figured sometimes. However, it is the haridāsas who conferred a distinct shape on it. They set up a convention of reciting stories of hari - *harikatha* - in songs of their own or of other haridāsas; these songs reveal time and again that dancing was a part of this convention. In fact, they originated a whole orthodoxy of dancing in respect of *sulādis* a prabandha type which they resurrected and reorganised. In particular, Purandaradāsa mentions dancing in harikīrtan in many of his songs:

केळनो हरिं ताळनो । ताळमेळगळिद्दु प्रेमविह्लद गान ।
अडिगडिगानन्दबाष्पपुळकदिन्द । नुडिनुडिगे श्रीहरियेनुत ।
दृढभक्तरनुगूडि हरिकीर्तनेय पाडि । कडेगे श्रीपुरन्दरविठलनेन्दरे पेळव ।

Vyāsarāya (15th-16th cent.) says of his disciple Purandaradāsa:

दासरेन्दरे पुरन्दरदासरय्य ।...
गीतनर्तनदि श्रीकृष्णन्नपूजिसुव
पूतात्मपुरन्दरदासरिवरय्य ।

Vyāsarāya's own guru, Srīpādarāya (15th cent.)

व्यर्थवल्लवे जन्म व्यर्थवल्लवे ।
ताळतंबूरिगळिन्दे कालगेज्जेध्वनिगळिद्दु ।
कोळुगोण्डन्ते हरिय चालि पोगळदवन जन्म ॥

It is thus clear that the Katha Kirtan had musical accompaniment on instruments — *tāla* and *mela* (ताळबेकु, तक्कमेळबेकु) and *tambūri* was integral to any Katha Kirtan performance. Purandaradāsa says:

तंबूरि मोदलाद अखिळवाद्यगळिद्दु ।
कोंबुकोळलु ध्वतिस्वरगळिद्दु ।
तुंबुरुनारदर गान केळुव हरि ।
नंबलार ई डंबकद कूगाट ॥

Further, the haridāsas established a corpus of literary and musical material on which a Katha Kirtan could be, and was, based. They have composed numerous songs in translation, paraphrase or extension of verses from the epics and the *purāṇas* on diverse story themes on *Viṣṇu*, including many in antiphony, description, narration and comment. They may be readily fitted into a Katha Kirtan and allow many techniques of presentation. They also admit of a sequential presentation of themes on orthodoxy, dogma, philosophy and spiritual endeavour using story narration as medium. The *ekādaśi bhajana paddhati* of the Bhāgavatas and Mādhvas of Karnataka has retained this even today. In addition to this, two unique *prabandhas* or operas may be noticed in this connection: Śrīpādarāya has composed the very first *Bhramaragīta*, called *Śṛṅgāra pārijāta* in any south Indian language. This is an album of songs which contain high potential in music, narration and dancing. Vādirāja's (16th cent.) *Bhramaragīta* is the first fullfledged opera in South India. It is a fully dramatised *harikathā* in which

histrionics, music and dancing may be effectively blended. The author himself clearly states that he composed it for such performance. Thus the Katha Kirtan extended its dimensions in the 16th cent. because of the work of the haridāsas.

In fact, Katha Kirtan acquired the name *harikathā* in Karnataka indisputably due to the haridāsas. The use of this expression in this content was probably inaugurated by Śrīpādarāya:

ना निनगेनु बेडुवुदिल्ल । एन्न हृदयकमलदोळु निन्दिरो हरिये ।
कर्ण हरिकथेय केळलि एन्न । नासिक निर्माल्य घ्राणिसलि हरिये ॥

Purandaradāsa uses the word in several songs to connote a story narration in music of *līlā* and *māhātmya* of Hari which teaches the devotee *bhakti, jñāna* and *vairāgya,* thus leading him to *mukti.* Only a few instances will be cited here:

(1) मुत्तैदेयागिरबेकु मुददिन्दलि ।
हृत्तुनूरुनामदोडेय हरि नम्म पतियेन्दु ॥
हरिकथेय केळुवुदे किविगे मुत्तिनवोले ।
निस्तसत्कर्मवे निजकान्तियु ।
परमभक्तर पादरज हेरळुभङ्गार ।
गुरुभकुतियेंबज्य गन्धकुङ्कुम धरिस्सि ॥

(2) हरिकथाश्रवण माडो निरन्तर ।
परगतिगिदु निर्धारनोडो ॥

(3) हरिकथामृतसविय हरिदासरल्लदे ।
दुरुळमानवरदर परि बल्लरेनय्य ॥

(4) हरिभकुतिसुखवु अनुभविगल्लदे मिक्क ।
नरगुरिगळदर स्वाद बल्लरे ।
सरस पञ्चामृतव श्वान ता बल्लुदे ।
हरिकथाश्रवण कत्तेयदु बल्लुदे ।

(5) सुम्मने बाह्रोदे मुकुति नम्म ।
चेन्नादिकेशवन दयवागदनक ।
कामक्रोध विडवेकु—हरि ।
नामसङ्कीर्तने गाडलु बेकु ।

(6) विषयद विचार विदु विहितकर्मवमाडु।
वैराग्य बेडु।
अनुदिनदि हरिकथेय केळि सन्तोषपडु।
दिनदिनवु सज्ञनर कूडु।

(7) इरबेकु हरीदासर सङ्ग।
वरज्ञानिगळ दय संपादिसबेकु।
अतिज्ञानियागि हरिकथेय केळबेकु।
यतिगळ पादक्के एरगबेकु॥

Serialisation of a *harikathā* is not a recent idea; listen to Purandara-dāsa:

हरिय नेनेयिरो नम्म। हरिय नेनेयिरो।
हाळु हरटे माडि मनव। बीळुमाडिकोळ्ळबेरो।
एळु दिनद कथेय केळि। एळिरय्य वैकुण्ठके।

In its next and final phase, Katha Kirtan has enriched itself from its Maharashtrian analogue through terretorial contiguity and the consequent cultural diffusion. Rāmacandra Buvā migrated into North Karnataka from Maharashtra in the 19th century and with him came the Marathi songs and techniques of presentation. The theme of political mobilisation also found a correspondence here: for Jayarāmācārya of Koppala made patriotism the main theme of his Katha Kirtan presentations. Three recent achievements of Karnataka in the field of Katha Kirtan deserve mention here: a treatise on *harikathā* by Betūru Keśavadāsa, a *harikathā* manual by Hosakere Cidambarayya and systematic, institutionalised training in *harikathā* by Bhadagiri Kesava dāsa who, through his Katha Kirtan discourses in English and wide travel, has added an international dimension to the art. This reflects the trends of growth of the art both in the traditional and neoconventional aspects.

II. THEME

The values which the Katha Kirtan seeks to instil in the *sāmājika* are inextricably interwoven into the fabric of the Indian heritage in its religious, spiritual, philosophical, ethical and cultural aspects, though as mentioned above, it has also served other needs on occasion. It reaches out to the group through the individual and *vice versa.* It aims to set up, without being overtly didactic, codes of conduct and character for the individual. This is its *raison d'etre.*

Therefore, the choice of theme and its presentation are equally important in Katha Kirtan. Needless to say, the resources and qualifications of its performer are no less important, for he is looked upon by the *sāmājika* as the repository and model of the precepts which he endeavours to teach. These qualifications are set forth for both art and artist by Bharatamuni (*vide infra*) and by Someśvara III (*vide supra*). Bharata has done so in the context of *nāṭya*, the total theatre, which is yet another most effective, though not equally inexpensive, composite art. What these masters say in respect of thematic content merits our close attention.

Yet, if Katha Kirtan is to retain its functional relevance and at the same time maintain itself in the mainstream of our cultural continuity, it must draw, more than any other art form, both inspiration and thematic material from the people themselves.

The theme in Katha Kirtan should be studied in relation to the expressive potential of the instruments it employs, viz , narration, histrionics, dancing and the musical paraphernalia, which includes *rāga*, *tāla*, formal structure, etc. If the performance is to be effective, care in choice of the appropriate material in each of these as well as skill in communication should be exercised. The *sāmājikas* of a Katha Kirtan are assorted in respect of age, sex, prior preparation, cultural and social strata, religious or spiritual orientation, etc. Therefore a common denominator should be determined as far as feasible in selection of theme and content, and the variation in theme should accord with the composition of the *sāmājikas*. The Katha Kirtan provides a forum in which social and cultural heritages are shared in a climate of emotional involvement and equalisation, mutual tolerance, sympathy and respect. This contributes to the formation of a monolithic, lubricated social structure. The theme and its presentations should be therefore governed by this requirement.

The size of repertory in Katha Kirtan is in direct proportion to the number and direction of the windows it opens on the world. Care should be exercised however, while innovating and varying the theme so that they are not antilogical to its entirety and perspectives. As the bases of social integration shift to new positions or new foci, there is a corresponding shift in cultural content. Cultural coherence is realised by infusing

its various parts with a common ethos. Hence there should be a parallel innovation and variation in themes also in as many cultural and social media as possible, if the latter should continue to be relevant to the times and the aspirations of the group.

A pertinent question in this connection is: how much of the past should be retained? When contacts with past grow faint, doctrines, sagas, heroes and achievement fade away; and culture shrinks; historical continuity becomes a casuality. Hence thematic variation and innovation should be gradual, natural, logical.

Some aspects of thematic variation in Katha Kirtan deserve — and demand — consideration. What limits should be set on themes, if the art is not to compromise on its importance and function? Such limits are obviously necessary: any and every variation in the life of the community does not possess a thematic value. For admission into the Katha Kirtan a theme should pass two tests: (1) it should be central, not peripheral, to the cultural system; and (2) it should be capable of being translated and transformed in the framework of this art.

Next, what should be the proportion of *upākhyāna* in relation to the *ākhyāna* itself? How much should there be of the humorous, anecdotal and illustrative? The case of tail wagging the dog is, unfortunately, all too common in the performing arts these days. Excesses in sophistry of the auxiliary arts such as music, histrionics and dancing should be carefully avoided. Only good taste in both performer and *sāmājika* can be arbiter in the matter of proportion. Nothing should be presented in the performance which exceeds necessity relevance and good taste.

What should — or could — be the themes in today's Katha Kirtan? The *raison d'etre* of this medium continues to be to enable the individual to adjust to, and work with, the group in the fulfilment of its needs and aspirations. Therefore Katha Kirtan and its themes assume the role of a lubricant. Present day social life is torn asunder under stresses and strains of social and economic inequality more than ever; the gap in mutual understanding and consideration is widening. Moral values have dimmed. Artificial barriers of caste, colour, creed, wealth and power have sharply risen, alienating man from man. Mutual distrust, self promotion, self aggrandizement are weakening social bonds. Uplift of

the oppressed sections of the society, eradication of untouchability, etc., are still in the realm of political dreams.

The role of Katha Kirtan in buttressing our society against these and other weaknesses is, therefore, doubly important in educating parties on both sides of the gap. The themes in Katha Kirtan should be consonant with these needs and vary accordingly. I think the present format should continue at least for some time, drawing its material from the above mentioned traditional sources, but adapting it to the needs of our times; in other words, a reinterpretation and a reorientation are now necessary. Anything drastically different would not be readily accepted by the masses. New and different pictures can be painted on the old canvas; truth, honesty, conscientiousness, righteousness, internal and external purity, faithfulness, tolerance, sympathy, co-operation, considerateness, love of land and language, fraternity of man, courage of conviction, dignity of work — these and a thousand more could be the themes around which a Katha Kirtan could weave its tales and talent. Thus, and thus alone, would it be serving the cause of national reconstruction and our national constitution more effectively than any law enforcement or administrative agency ever could. Katha Kirtan's main technique is illustration from sources which are wholly integrated into the life of our people — especially the huge rural masses. Fear of God and divine punishment is still more influential than fear of law or of authority. Appeal to conscience, faith and the virtues of sharing is still more effective than political slogans.

Almost a thousand years ago, a wise emperor of Karnataka, a *sarvajña*, knew what he was talking about when he said that a *kathaka* — our *kirtanakāra* — should be a *lokavṛttāntadarśin.* He, therefore, recommends the following affective themes as positive, preventive and curative:

शौर्योदार्यगुणोपेता तथाद्भुतरसाश्रया ।
रौद्रबीभत्सहास्याढ्या करुणाभयनिर्भरा ॥
श्रृङ्गाररससंपूर्णा प्रेमभोगसुसंभृता ।
विप्रलंभरसोपेता दुर्घटे घटानान्विता ॥
ईर्ष्यादर्पसमोपेता मदमोहसमन्विता ।
नानाश्चर्यचरित्राढ्या नृपचित्तविनोदिनी ॥
आकर्णयेत् कथाः श्राव्या दिव्या भव्या मनोहराः ॥

To my mind, the most important function of the Katha Kirtan is to give to the common man a little faith, a little comfort, a little reassurance, a little humour, a little playfulness, little fear, a little affection, a little firmness when he needs it most. If he gains a little interest, a little detachment, a little devotion, a little zest for life from Katha Kirtan, then Katha Kirtan is fulfilled. The only and high mission of the *kīrtankāra* is to cure the sick in society gently, quickly and completely. His *modus operandi* is: लोकानुचरितवर्णन, लोकोपदेशजनन.

Almost two thousand years ago, the sage Bharatamuni envisioned aspirations of a sister composite art thus:

क्वचिद् धर्मः क्वचित् क्रीडा क्वचिदर्थः क्वचित् शमः।
क्वचिद् हास्यं क्वचिद् युद्धं क्वचित् कामः क्वचिद् वधः।
धर्मो धर्मप्रवृत्तनां कामः कामोपजीविनाम्।
निग्रहो दुर्विनीतानां विनीतानां दमक्रिया।
क्लीबानां धाष्टर्यजननं उत्साहः शूरमानिनाम्।
अबुधानां विबोधश्च वैदुष्यं विदुषामपि।
ईश्वराणां विलासश्च स्थैर्यं दुःखार्तितस्य च।
अर्थोपजीविनामर्थो धृतिरुद्विग्नचेतसाम्।
नानाभावोपसंपन्नं नानावस्थान्तरात्मकम्।
लोकवृत्तानुकरणं नाट्यमेतन्मया कृतम्।
उत्तमाधममध्यानां नराणां कर्मसंश्रयम्।
हितोपदेशजननं धृतिक्रीडासुखादिकृत्।
दुःखार्तानां श्रमार्तानां शोकार्तानां तपस्विनाम्।
विश्रान्तिजननं काले नाट्यमेतद् भविष्यति।

Nāṭya is a many-artists theatre; Katha Kirtan is a one man (or woman) theatre. Bharatamuni was a seer. His vision of a total theatre is truly total. If we re-read the last line as कीर्तनमेतद् भविष्यति, we have an aspiration. If we read it as कीर्तनमेतच्च भवतु, we have a benediction. Both would be appropriate to the context of the present endeavour of Katha Kirtan.